

Message Text

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ACTION EUR-12

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E.O. 11652: N/A
TAGS: SHUM, TU, PINT, PFOR
SUBJECT: DEMONSTRATION AT ECUMENICAL PATRIARCHATE

REF: ATHENS 4975

1. MAY 24 DEMONSTRATION MENTIONED BY ATHENS IN REFTEL BY SOME 200 MEMBERS OF CONSERVATIVE ISLAMIC STUDENT ORGANIZATION AT ECUMENICAL PATRIARCHATE RECEIVED LIMITED, UNSENSATIONAL COVERAGE IN ISTANBUL PAPERS. INTERESTINGLY, TURKEY'S LARGEST CIRCULATION DAILY HURRIYET, WHICH HAS IN PAST EXPLOITED CYPRUS AND ANTI-GREEK THEMES GAVE STORY ONLY SMALL, NEUTRAL ARTICLE ON INSIDE PAGES.

2. DEMONSTRATION WAS STAGED IN CONNECTION WITH 524TH. ANNIVERSARY OF OTTOMAN CONQUEST OF ISTANBUL. RIGHTIST GROUP SPONSORING THIS DEMONSTRATION IS CLOSELY ASSOCIATED WITH NATIONAL SALVATION PARTY (NSP) WHICH PLAYS HEAVILY TO RELIGIOUS SENTIMENT FOR ITS SUPPORT. WEEK BEFORE PROTEST AT PATRIARCHATE, THIS SAME STUDENT GROUP STAGED PRAY-IN AT BYZANTINE MASTERPIECE AYA SOPHIA WHICH IS NOW
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A MUSEUM AND OFF BOUNDS FOR RELIGIOUS SERVICES. ONE OF GROUPS DEMANDS IS THAT AYA SOPHIA BE CONVERTED INTO MOSQUE.

3. THIS ACTIVITY SERVED AS BUILDUP TO NSP LEADER ERBAKAN'S ELECTION CAMPAIGN APPEARANCE IN ISTANBUL'S CENTRAL TAKSIM SQUARE ON MAY 29. IN HIS SPEECH, ERBAKAN RESCINDED HIS PROMISE TO JOIN GROUP FOR PRAYERS IN AYA SOPHIA, BUT STATED THAT NEXT YEAR HE WOULD DO

SO, NSP, LIKEWISE, ADVOCATES CONVERTING AYA SOPHIA INTO MOSQUE. IN FACT, SAME DAY ERBAKAN SPOKE IN TAKSIM, HIS FOLLOWERS, REPORTEDLY NUMBERING SEVERAL THOUSAND, DEMONSTRATED IN FRONT OF AYA SOPHIA, WHICH GOVERNOR HAD ORDERED CLOSED AND ENCIRCLED WITH "JANDARMA" TROOPS. AT THAT GATHERING, ONE OF SLOGANS SHOUTED WAS DEMAND THAT ECUMENICAL PATRIARCHATE BE REMOVED FROM TURKEY. CROWD PEACEFULLY DISPERSED WITHOUT ENTERING AYA SOPHIA.

4. COMMENT: WE DO NOT AT THIS POINT SEE ANY CONCERTED CAMPAIGN AGAINST ECUMENICAL PATRIARCHATE. ABOVE ACTIVITIES UNDERTAKEN BY NSP FOLLOWERS WERE POLITICALLY MOTIVATED AND DIRECTED AGAINST TARGETS WHICH, BECAUSE OF THEIR SYMBOLISM, CAN ENGENDER EMOTIONAL REACTION AMONG LOCAL RELIGIOUS ZEALOTS. FOR VAST MAJORITY OF PEOPLE IN ISTANBUL, AYA SOPHIA IS ACCEPTED AS A MUSEUM, NOT LEAST OF ALL BECAUSE ATATURK HIMSELF DETERMINED THAT THAT SHOULD BE ITS STATUS. ALTHOUGH THEY MAY BE SUSPICIOUS OF THE PATRIARCHY IN CURRENT PERIOD OF TENSION IN TURKISH-GREEK RELATIONS, GENERALLY RESIDENTS OF CITY DO NOT CONSIDER QUESTION OF ITS STATUS A LIVE ISSUE. NONETHELESS, EVERY SO OFTEN, ESPECIALLY DURING TIMES OF HEIGHTENED POLITICAL ACTIVITY OR ANIMOSITY TOWARD GREECE, CONTINUED PRESENCE IN ISTANBUL OF "GREEK" PATRIARCHY IS PROTESTED BY RELIGIOUS GROUPS. IN RECENT YEARS, LOCAL AUTHORITIES HAVE PROVIDED PROTECTION NECESSARY TO INSURE THAT THINGS DO NOT GET OUT OF HAND. AS BACKGROUND WE ARE POUCHING TO ATHENS AND NICOSIA COPY OF RECENT REPORT WE PREPARED ON STATUS OF MINORITIES IN ISTANBUL. IF OTHER ADDRESSEES INTERESTED WILL BE HAPPY TO FORWARD IT TO THEM.

OGDEN
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Message Attributes

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